Lessons Learned in the Implementation of Missouri's Caring Communities
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This paper describes lessons learned by representatives from state agencies and communities who helped formulate and establish Missouri's first Caring Communities.

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I. Introduction

Missouri is committed to improving the lives of children and families through the delivery of comprehensive, neighborhood-based, school-linked services. This commitment has grown over the past five years as Caring Communities in Kansas City, Knox and Schuyler Counties, and St. Louis City have worked in their respective communities to support families by making services widely available, accessible, and tailored to strengths and needs.

Initially identified as "experiments," Caring Communities have evolved, as intended, in different ways. Each continues to work toward full implementation of the Caring Communities service delivery approach. Their knowledge and experiences are instructive as Caring Communities are expanded statewide.

The purpose of this paper is to capture what has been learned by people involved in the original planning and in the day-to-day pioneering efforts to build Caring Communities. The intent is to benefit from their valuable experiences by documenting those "lessons learned" by representatives from state agencies and communities who helped formulate and establish Missouri's first Caring Communities.

Information contained in the paper was compiled from conversations with people who were instrumental in the development of the early Caring Communities initiatives in Kansas City, Knox and Schuyler Counties, and St. Louis City. Direct quotations from the community members and service professionals interviewed appear under the particular lessons they illustrate. These quotations serve to highlight and summarize common elements in the implementation of Caring Communities. Interviews were conducted by phone and in-person with twenty-two people, including members of the state's Caring Communities Interagency Team, local Caring Communities staff, and school principals. In addition, several other individuals who have a historical perspective on Caring Communities were interviewed. Interviewees were asked questions to solicit information about both the initial organization of Caring Communities and their subsequent implementation.

II. Summary

A Caring Communities approach is a responsive and integrated way to achieve better results for children and families because it customizes service delivery. Services are school-based or school-linked, provided in the neighborhood, and designed to support and preserve families. The experiences of Caring Communities in Kansas City, Knox and Schuyler Counties, and the city of St. Louis offer valuable information and insights regarding the development and implementation of this approach.

Information relayed through interviews conducted with representatives of these Caring Communities reflects several common themes. The "lessons learned," as well as the challenges identified, are summarized below. They highlight important elements and issues for consideration as current Caring Communities continue to evolve and as other communities develop this new approach to service delivery.

A. Lessons Learned

Caring Communities have learned that creating a positive, supportive climate, building on community strengths, and developing an infrastructure to achieve results are critical components of the Caring Communities approach.

Caring Communities should create a positive, supportive **climate** by:

- establishing **trust** and **credibility**;
- making a **commitment** to a collaborative process;
- being **flexible**, **creative** and **taking risks**; and
- providing **on-going communication** and **education** to build understanding and commitment.

"Building trust is really important. . .collaboration has to become a way of life. . . have a 'whatever it takes' attitude. . . changing attitudes requires communicating and educating."

Caring Communities need to **build on strengths** by:

- **identifying** community **needs and assets** to custom design service delivery; and
- **securing** the active **involvement of community** members to promote ownership and empowerment.

"What is there, what is missing, and what can be added? Involve all those different worlds out there."

Caring Communities should develop an **infrastructure** that:

- allows **flexible approaches** to governance and financing;
- encourages active, articulate **leadership**;
- **supports integration** and **coordination of services**; and
- includes **evaluation** to assess and measure progress toward results.

"It will look different in different communities. Leadership makes the difference. The focus must remain on the neighborhood. Systems change requires the ability to measure results."

B. Future Challenges and Opportunities

Caring Communities' experiences in implementing and developing an approach to link services to schools in the neighborhoods they serve has taught them that it is hard work and that there are important challenges ahead. Addressing those challenges noted below will require the collective efforts of the state and communities.

- **Institutionalization of the Caring Communities vision** so that all levels of state institutions and community organizations understand and are committed to better results for children and families.

- Undertaking **systems reform** to ensure that rules, procedures, policies and the mechanics of systems in all participating state agencies support the implementation of Caring Communities.

- Developing a **partnership with the Federal Government** to help remove barriers to local planning efforts.

- Ensuring **Caring Communities role in shaping** the design, delivery, and financing of **supports, services, and economic opportunities** for children and families.

- Building on and strengthening **statewide reform efforts at the local level** to strengthen Caring Communities.

- Forging new **alliances with the private sector** to enhance the ability of Caring Communities to provide supports and services for families.

- Informing, and responding to, **local political forces and vested interests** resistant to the more comprehensive, integrated approach upon which Caring Communities is based.

- Responding to issues related to changes in **personnel roles and responsibilities**.

The growth and continued success of current and future Caring Communities will be enhanced by their ability to meet these challenges.

III. Lessons Learned

"Lessons Learned," as described by individuals from the state, schools, and communities who have been part of Caring Communities, reflects many shared ideas. The content of these individual's remarks was often similar and, in fact, much of the same language was used. During the past six years, "caring communities" has come to mean many of the same things to the people involved, even though there have been different paths taken to implement an approach which links services to schools and the neighborhoods they serve.

The "lessons learned" are designed to serve as guideposts. If applied consistently and conscientiously, they will be valuable tools to help Missourians achieve desired results for children and families.

A. Creating a Climate for Caring Communities: Building Blocks

Lesson #1: Trust and credibility are fundamental to establishing a strong foundation for Caring Communities.

"It's not easy, but building trust is really, really important. You have to make sure people believe you and believe your intentions."

Building Caring Communities requires trust and confidence in people and in the ways in which change gets implemented. Communicating often, doing what you say you will do, and being available, accessible, and honest are practices which promote an environment of trust and credibility.

Communities "tested" the state of Missouri to see if they could count on what was being said regarding change. It took time for communities to trust that an approach to achieving better results for children and families would get created at the local level. As school personnel and Caring Communities staff worked together to support children and families, families felt secure that their concerns would be addressed.

When people believe that a sincere effort is being made to do business in a new way - that it is not merely public relations or "just another government program" - barriers to change start to break down. "It took time to

convince teachers that Caring Communities was important and needed. Now they're advocates," reports a principal. The active involvement and listening of interested parties helps eliminate skepticism about motives. As one Caring Communities staff person noted, "We know our families and they know us. They'll actually seek us out. That would not have happened before Caring Communities."

Lesson #2: The development of Caring Communities is an on-going, dynamic process that requires a commitment to collaboration.

"Collaboration is harder than accountability. It's an unnatural act but it has to become a way of life. It has to be an open process, allowing people to move in and out."

Implementation of Caring Communities requires a commitment to an on-going, open process of collaboration. While the goal is not collaboration per se, improving outcomes for family and children calls for the active involvement of many people, as well as systems. "There is no single recipe," suggests a state agency employee, "no right or wrong ways," says a Caring Communities staff person.

A commitment to collaboration is reflected in an investment of time and resources. "A tremendous amount of time and energy goes into the process to identify and document needs, to plan, to communicate with the community, schools, and families, and to change the way services are organized and delivered," reports a Caring Communities staff person. The process may appear to be to slow to show progress. The length of time that the commitment is needed extends from days, to months, to years, before any measurable change occurs.

In addition to allowing time for collaboration, the process needs support through technical assistance, training, supervision, and networking as well as "hand-holding" and "trouble-shooting." There should be guidance and reinforcement to help the community and service providers understand the realities of change, and the tension that exists between the new and old ways of doing business. The dynamic process must accommodate political interests, service needs, diverse viewpoints on how to proceed, and differing levels of readiness for change.

Lesson #3: Flexibility, creativity, and risk-taking must be elements of a collaborative process to design responsive and innovative Caring Communities.

"You have to have a 'whatever it takes' attitude, as long as it's not unethical, immoral or illegal."

Creativity and receptivity to try new ways of doing things are integral to Caring Communities. The need for creativity and flexibility is countered by established ways of thinking and ownership of particular activities. The collaborative process needs to focus on how things can be done differently and more effectively, not on how they have always been done. "Without creativity and flexibility, the change process slows down," says a state agency person. Commitment to a vision and a set of parameters needs to supersede dependence on established rules, regulations, and procedures. A collaborative process can raise more questions than it answers. The many unknowns and ambiguities make some people uncomfortable. How the process will actually evolve, who all the players will be over time, and what it will mean to individual roles and responsibilities are some of the ambiguous issues that may have to be addressed.

The state and communities must be willing to take risks to respond to these unknowns and to create a new agenda for children and families. The process dictates a need to "do a lot of risky, ground-breaking stuff" as part of creating a climate for change.

Lesson #4: Communication and education are critical to build understanding of and commitment to Caring Communities.

"Changing attitudes about what is possible, and deciding how to get at mutual concerns, requires communicating and educating new people all the time."

Caring Communities know that on-going communication is important. Barriers to communications - such as time constraints, turnover in personnel, and resistance to change - have to be identified and overcome to allow decision-making and problem-solving to occur.

Two-way communication needs to take place at all levels of state government and among all stakeholders, including Caring Communities staff, The Family Investment Trust, school personnel, families, and neighbors. A school principal reported that "one of the most helpful sessions we had was with school and Caring Communities staff; it was a great opportunity to share information and to learn from each other; it had a positive effect on what we were doing." Communication among staff also is critical to ensure that roles and responsibilities are clearly delineated and understood by everyone involved. Principals, site coordinators, and other Caring Communities staff must understand their relationship to each other and be able to communicate on a regular basis. Sharing information and ideas facilitates innovation and commitment to guiding principles.

Part of the communication process includes "continuing education" of interested parties, as well of those impacted and involved, regarding the purpose and benefits of Caring Communities. From the initial planning phase, and continuing through implementation and reporting results, communication and information sharing is critical to create and promote a shared vision for change.

B. Developing Caring Communities: Building on Strengths

Lesson #5: Community needs and assets must be identified to design service delivery that is customized for Caring Communities.

"After you do your assessment, ask 'what's there, what's missing from this picture?' and 'what can be added?' to complete the picture."

Caring Communities are advocates for community assessments of needs and resources - to determine what residents want and what is being provided. Because initial struggles to work together can be difficult, it is helpful for communities to identify starting points so there is some common ground of understanding.

Planning for services requires input from families who can identify community and individual needs. A Caring Communities director reports, "We thought more broadly after reaching out into the community to help us identify needs. You can't be prescriptive if you expect the community to determine the best ways to deliver services." Need and resource identification allows people to build upon strengths and to think of innovative ways to utilize and modify services.

Lesson #6: Caring Communities need the active involvement of community members to promote ownership and empowerment.

"There are a lot of different worlds out there and you have to involve them all."

When you involve people in their community, they develop a stake in its future. This builds ownership and, ultimately, empowers people. "Voices together can get things done," says a Caring Communities staff person. The "voices" need to represent the diversity in communities so that all interests are heard and can participate.

"Ownership" of Caring Communities at the local level is important. The State and the Family Investment Trust can help facilitate the process, remove barriers, and provide valuable assistance, but communities are responsible for the results. Community stakeholders - school administrators, teachers, staff, neighbors, families - must ultimately decide what's in their best interest.

Involvement with Caring Communities occurs in many formal and informal ways. Sensitivity to how and when people want to be involved is important. "If parents can't attend a meeting during the day, schedule it in the evening," suggests a director of Caring Communities. Getting people involved early in the process also is important. "Planning should be done by people who will be most affected," says a Caring Communities staff person.

C. Organizing for Results: Building an Infrastructure

Lesson #7: Governance and financing of Caring Communities should support flexible approaches to achieve positive results.

"Governance and structure need to help ensure an on-going, flexible process so it looks different in different communities."

Caring Communities want to get things done in an expedient, effective way. Any governing body and, in particular, the fiscal agent, must be responsive to a collaborative process that requires creativity and flexibility. Governance must support, not hinder, collaboration.

Additional state bureaucracy or "red tape" which thwarts efforts to change should be avoided. Careful selection of the fiscal agent and issues of control, management, and decision-making have to be addressed by communities. Communities are making decisions about their needs and priorities and about the best ways to respond. The governing structure must allow this to be accomplished in the most effective and efficient ways. Everyone involved must attempt to be responsive while still cognizant of the current limitations and barriers of existing structures.

State-level systems and procedures ultimately have to change to work for communities. Adherence to the complexities of rules and regulations can be mistaken for a resistance to change on the part of agency employees. "There's bound to be tensions while the state tries to reform its systems," says a state agency person.

Lesson #8: Active leadership is needed to articulate, advocate and implement the vision for Caring Communities.

"Leadership makes the difference."

Leading change is not easy. Individuals and organizations who provide leadership for change are easy targets for criticism. Caring Communities need both individual and collective leadership that is strong and able to communicate and guide implementation of a responsive and integrated approach to service delivery.

Community level leadership helps to build the commitment and trust of stakeholders. The leaders have the job of responding if people are unhappy with the changes taking place in the community. Respected and skilled leadership can handle these types of situations and help devise new ways of working together.

A representative advisory board or committee plays an important leadership role at the neighborhood level. Together with staff leadership, this body should be an advocate, problem-solver, and liaison to the community. "An advisory board can bridge the gap between the school, professionals, and the community," suggests a Caring Communities staff person.

Lesson #9: Service delivery strategies that promote integration and cooperation provide a framework for supporting children and families.

"Make it a truly collaborative service delivery system focused on the neighborhood."

Caring Communities are catalysts to develop an integrated service system that responds to the question: "Is it good for kids and families?" suggests a Caring Communities director. The more comprehensive the services, the better the gains. This includes changing things in the classrooms to improve educational outcomes as well as providing prevention services to children and families. "Integration of services brings everyone together and saves time and money."

We are "treading on the same path at the same time," says a Caring Communities principal. Working with community service providers, Caring Communities develop ways to share ideas and information. "It gives you additional expertise, makes everybody's job easier, and eliminates duplication." Working cooperatively also heightens the visibility of Caring Communities.

"This is not just another human service delivery system," a Caring Communities director reports. Caring Communities can significantly change results for children and families through a system that builds and strengthens service integration and cooperation.

Lesson #10: Evaluation is necessary to ensure that Caring Communities achieve desired results for children and families.

"Measuring outcomes lays the groundwork for real systems change."

There are many reasons why evaluating outcomes, or results, is important. Taxpayers need to know that their dollars are making a difference. State agencies need to be responsive to the legislature. Teachers need to know what is being accomplished because it helps them do their jobs. Children need to know they are doing better so they keep trying. Everyone needs to know that if the results are not what is expected, then changes and modifications in strategies are needed.

Identifying and measuring results is not easy, but Caring Communities appreciate the importance of evaluation, particularly in relation to accountability. An evaluation process which helps to further refine and identify the needs of children and families - as determined by the community - can drive service delivery.

A collaborative approach which solicits ideas from the community regarding results to consider builds support for evaluation. "Evaluation of our progress will help us stay connected to the community," suggests a Caring Communities staff person.

IV. Challenges and Opportunities

As Caring Communities are developed throughout the state, there are lessons to be learned not only from what has been attempted or accomplished, but also from what is yet to be done. Challenges and opportunities lie ahead as Caring Communities look to the future and are joined by others working to realize Missouri's vision for strong families whose children are safe and healthy, succeeding in school, and prepared to enter adulthood as productive citizens.

A number of the significant challenges facing Caring Communities are listed below. These challenges will need to be addressed collectively, over time, with solutions drawn from the experiences of the current Caring Communities as well as from innovative responses new Caring Communities may identify.

Institutionalization of the Caring Communities Vision

Institutionalizing the vision for Caring Communities requires that all levels, within all state institutions and community organizations, understand and are committed to better results for children and families. Lack of knowledge or misinformation about "changes" being undertaken may impede or hinder the ability to achieve the desired results. A concentrated effort to develop "champions" at different levels will expedite the institutionalization of Caring Communities.

Systems Reform

Rules, procedures, policies, and the mechanics of systems in all participating state agencies should support the implementation of Caring Communities. Those that present obstacles will have to be revised and/or eliminated, as appropriate. This is necessary in order to maximize the operational strategies which form the basis for partnerships between communities and government: accountability for results, bringing services closer to where families live and children attend school, active community involvement, and using dollars more flexibly and effectively. Legislative barriers also will need to be addressed for comprehensive system reform to be developed in support of Caring Communities.

Partnership with the Federal Government

The balance between accountability and community capacity is an important factor for the state in relation to the federal government. Traditional federal reporting requirements are often cumbersome and time-consuming. The federal government can become a partner with the state in Caring Communities and help support local planning efforts.

Possible actions for the federal government to take are to revise requirements, provide information on how other states are implementing similar approaches, and conduct analyses on pertinent variables to determine what works and what does not work well. A partnership with the federal government may also make it easier to anticipate changes in federal laws and mandates and determine how these would effect what happens at the state and community levels.

Caring Communities and Community Partnerships

While Community Partnerships are the collaborative decision-making bodies that build bridges across community stakeholders, Caring Communities are responsible for shaping the design, delivery, and financing of supports, services, and economic opportunities for families and children. The role Caring Communities play in identifying and determining what neighborhood-based services and supports are needed is critical. Community Partnerships offer the opportunity to help improve and expand Caring Communities. The respective involvement of each will improve the capacity of communities and neighborhoods to achieve better results for children and families.

Community Partnerships and the Caring Communities schools must intentionally structure the relationship of those employed by the Caring Communities and those employed by other agencies. Questions of supervision, evaluation, hiring, and termination must be created.

Community-Level Reform Efforts

Implementation of state reform efforts at the local level is an important aspect of Caring Communities. The Outstanding Schools Act and the Health Care Reform Bill, both major reforms aimed at improving the education and health of Missouri's children and youth, as well as the Department of Social Services' and Division of Family Services' reform of child protective services, are among the state's important initiatives. Building on these existing change efforts which improve results for children and families will strengthen Caring Communities.

Private Sector Involvement

The development of public-private partnerships to build community capacity offers many opportunities for Caring Communities, particularly when the private sector is providing many neighborhood-based services. As Caring Communities continue to grow and evolve, forging new alliances with the private sector that leverage resources and increase the effectiveness of private community-based agencies will enhance the ability of Caring Communities to provide supports and services for families.

Local Political Pressures

Caring Communities are susceptible to local politics and should be aware of their community's political landscape. Interest - and politics- increases as dollars are made available. Political forces and vested interest may resist the more comprehensive, integrated approach upon which Caring Communities is based. An informed and active response will be an on-going requirement.

Personnel Roles and Responsibilities

Caring Communities represent fundamental changes for people who have been in state and local institutions for a long time. There will be changes that may effect career choices and paths and also have an impact on the ways things are accomplished on a daily basis. Roles and responsibilities may change. Caring Communities will have to be sensitive to personnel issues and give careful attention to how they are addressed.

Those involved with Caring Communities have made tremendous contributions on behalf of the children and families of Missouri. Documenting what they have learned - what their experience has taught them - is the first step in using their knowledge to benefit the children and families in other communities throughout Missouri. The lessons they have learned are valuable ones.

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